DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 750 CS 213 025

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TITLE Women and Agriculture: Blending the Facts with Fiction.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (San Antonio, TX, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agricultural Trends; *Agriculture; Authors; *Farmers; *Females; *Fiction; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; *Social History; United States History; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Farm Women; *Women in Literature; Womens Literature

ABSTRACT

Though the diversity of farm women's contributions was recognized by novelists such as Cather, Aldrich, and Sandoz in the 1800s, it would be many decades later before the work efforts of farm women would be formally recognized by the government and agricultural researchers. The West used a masculine environment, and farm animals and females where expected to conform to the dictums of both. While fiction after World War II was less likely to focus on agriculture and women's role in agriculture, modern fiction writers such as Molly Gloss (in her novel, "The Jump Off Creek," about a middle-aged woman homesteader in Oregon in the 1890s) and Mary Blew (in her short story collections, "Lambing Out" and "Runaway") vividly portray the historical and contemporary dimensions of the interdependency of women and agriculture by blending the facts with fiction. Excerpts from the works of Gloss and Blew illustrate the struggle of women to earn a living from their land and to survive in a masculine dominated world. Studying these works in the college English classroom can add to students' knowledge about the role of women in United States history. (PRA)

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WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE:
BLENDING THE FACTS WITH FICTION

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San Antonio, Texas
April 18-20, 1991

CS213025

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Women and Agriculture: Blending the Facts with Fiction

by Gayle Ann Morris

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the diversity of Western farm women's contributions and their fictional portrayal. The contributions of women's work on the farm have often been underspecified or neglected entirely by government agencies and researchers. In contrast, of all women's work roles that have been portrayed in fiction, agriculture is one of the most frequent work roles described in American literature written in the 1800s and early 1900s (e.g., the writings of Cather, Aldrich, and Sandoz). Post World War II fiction is less likely to focus on agriculture and women's role in agriculture, emphasizing instead the issues confronting women whether they live in rural or urban settings. In the short stories of Patricia Henley (Friday Night at Silver Star) rural communities and/or farms become the visual landscape in which female characters are placed to confront their past and influence their future. Human relationships (men and women, women and women, parents and children) are the focus; the land, and people's relationship to it are secondary.

The emphasis changes in the two short story collections of Mary Blew (Lambing Out and Runaway) and the novel The Jump-Off Creek by Molly Gloss. In the fiction of these two writers the struggle of women to earn a living from the land, and to survive in a masculine world dominates and shapes their human relationships.

CHANGING STRUCTURE OF U.S. AGRICULTURE

The United States was characterized as an agricultural nation until the 1900s and the majority of its population lived on farms; in the mid-1800s, 90% of Americans lived on farms. By the early 1900s this percentage had decreased to 60%, and by 1990 it was less than 2%. Though the rate of outmigration rapidly decreased the number of people working in agriculture, the amount of land in agriculture remained relatively stable. This resulted in an increase in farm size from less than 200 acres at the turn of the century to 600 acres today.

As a result of the economic stress experienced by the agricultural sector in the early 1980s many farm organizations focused on the need to "save the family farm." While there are many definitions of the family farm this paper uses the economic definition of a farm with agricultural product sales between $40,000 and $100,000. That the family farm continues to survive at all appears to be largely dependent on under-consumption by the farm family and the exploitation of family labor (i.e. the willingnesss of family members to work long hours for little or no renumeration). Farm women (and children) have played a crucial role in maintaining the family farm by their participation in both paid and unpaid labor activities.

WOMEN'S WORK ROLES: FACT AND FICTION

Though the majority of farm women work with a husband, brother, or other male figure directly assisting them, 5% of the

farmers in the U.S. in the 1980s were women who farmed alone. In 1978 the U.S. Agricultural Census first reported the gender of farmers answering its data forms. In comparison to their male counterparts the majority of women farmers run smaller farms (285 acres to 423 acres) and earn less income ($16,000 to $26,000). They are also older as a group (59 years versus 50 years) which is largely attributed to their widowed status. The majority of women farmers run livestock or cash grain operations, tobacco, and/or fruit and nut enterprises. (Kalbacher)

Women farmers as head of household continue the historical legacy of their single or widowed sisters who homesteaded western lands in the 1800s and early 1900s. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided single women and widows with the opportunity to own land. A homesteader in the 1862 Act was defined as a person of at least 21 years of age and head of a family; gender was unspecified. Women homesteaders who lived on their claim for five continuous years and improved their land would receive title to that land, the same conditions as existed for male homesteaders. In some western states (e.g. North Dakota and South Dakota) one-third of the land was owned by women. According to local land office records women were more likely than men to make a final claim on their homestead (37% for men and 42% for women). (Patterson-Black)

Like many of their real-life counterparts, fictional female proprietors are responsible for all farm work as well as domestic chores. Such a fictional proprietor is Lydia Sanderson, the

middle-aged woman homesteader in The Jump Off Creek who purchased a claim in the Blue Mountains of Oregon in the 1890s. Reflecting on a running list of chores for herself Sanderson remarks:

I have promised myself and the patient Goats I will have a shed and good stout fence before the Weather turns. I know I will be at that work the whole Summer as I am a poor logger and must go a ways to find good trees. (The Jump Off Creek p.111)

Gloss continues her enumeration of Sandersons's list of chores:

On Sundays she left off the logging. She cut and split stove wood on that day, and did up a week's clean washing, made butter, did a thorough cleaning of the house, hoed along the garden rows, ... On Sundays, also, in the evenings or in the cool morning after the milk was done, she fished the Jump-Off Creek or the North Fork of the Meacham, or took the shotgun out and looked for meat. Then the milk which she'd taken in the morning, if it was clabbered enough and drained of whey, must be pressed and the curds cut and wrapped in a clean cloth and set down in the cairn. (The Jump Off Creek p.134)

When men were present, women were often needed to help with farm work as well as take full responsiblity for household chores and childcare. On-farm contributions of farm women include housekeeping responsibilities and child care (often defined as

domestic labor), and farm work. Women traditionally have performed nearly 100 % of the domestic labor on a farm. The type of farm labor performed depends on the size of farm, the type of farm, and role expectations held by the farm family. While farm men rarely perform domestic labor, farm women work in traditional male areas when their labor is required or as a supplement to male labor.

Returning to the family ranch for her sister's wedding the thirty-five-year-old female narrator in Mary Blew's "Granddaughters" surveys the homesteaders, their children and grandchildren, and reflects on the labor of men and women that has allowed her sister to be married in a formal garden wedding at their ranch:

> Here, in this quiet river valley where most of the pangs of the world were felt only at second hand ... were men and women burned and seasoned with the labor of constructing their world. Every foot of this land had been tramped, fenced, and toiled over until it could contain this gabled house, this lawn where Caroline could spread her flaming silk. ... Surely, if ever men were salt of the earth, true inheritors of everything we had been given or taught, these were the men. And hardly a woman here, hardly a woman who had not dug and sweated in the irrigation ditches, the hayfields, the machine sheds. ... These women in their best summer dresses were sunburned and creased, drivers of

cattle trucks, midwives of lambs, assistant greasemonkeys. ("Granddaughters" pp.65,68)

In "Paths Unto the Dead," another short story by Blew, a young woman visiting her great-aunts notices:

... her aunts' hands, always filled with knitting or sewing or food or tools, were gnarled, stiffened with too much heavy work and scarred by work that was too dangerous. Aunt Emily had a deep mark on her wrist that Jean knew was a rope burn, and both old women could display nicks and troughs on their fingers that had been left by knives, mowing-machine teeth, or barbed wire. ("Paths Unto the Dead" p.63)

Lydia Sanderson's offer to assist in the branding of her cattle prompts her two male neighbors to remember:

"We have worked a few branding crews with a woman holding down an end," he said slowly. "On a small outfit it's usual for the man's wife to pitch in, or his daughters if he has them." ... She nodded a second time. "I am used to doing that myself," she said, smiling slightly. (The Jump-Off Creek p.54)

Farm children frequently assist the adults in the completion of farm chores. Blew describes this work and the difficulties children encounter if they dream of opportunities beyond the farm

gate in her stories "The Midget," "College Bound," and "Lambing Out".

The West was a masculine environment, shaped and controlled by men when nature grudgingly acquiesced to them. (Jenson and Miller) Farm animals and females were expected to conform to the dictums of both. Adages about the hardships and workload endured by women (e.g. "women's work is never done") often linked the labor of women homesteaders and farm animals. "It was a great country for men and dogs, someone had written, but hell on women and horses." ("Runaway" p.192) The drudgery of work for both women and animals is expressed by a character in the novel Free Land: "This country's hard on women and oxen." (Hornbostel p.112)

Lydia Sanderson's arrival as an independent woman in the Blue Mountains of Oregon elicits mixed reactions from her male neighbors.

"I haven't seen Evelyn in a year, and we wouldn't have come now, except he must get his look at the woman homesteader."

Lydia smiled briefly, sourly. "I am famous, then."

"Well, until they have all seen you once or twice, and made up their minds that you are bound to fail!" Doris McAnally's smile was sour also. (The Jump-Off Creek pp.123-124)

"I have bought a place along the Jump-Off Creek, " she said, and swung one hand in a vague gesture east or north or both. He was not surprised. Once in Montana and a couple of times later in the Spokane country, he had known women who'd homesteaded alone. They had had a steadfast look, or a doggedness, and now that he was watching for it, he could see it in this woman's face. He thought what he had taken for thinness might be a hard, worn-down lean. (The Jump-Off Creek p.5)

In Blew's story "Paths Unto the Dead" a young woman listens to the stories of her great-aunts, notices their scarred hands and arms, and wonders:

Any prettiness that they might have had, they had used up right away, Jean thought with resentment. It was as though prettiness were something to be left behind as soon as possible ... ("Paths Unto the Dead" p.63)

Western women frequently toiled alongside men to earn a living from the land, but as they worked they were themselves remolded to fit the dominant male purview. And if no male children were present then girls were given "honorary son titles". Blew's female characters acknowledge this surrogate gender role:

Those last two summers on the ranch, before she had finished high school, and while Carl was off on the circuit ... Kate had been the one Father turned to. He had been almost famous, a legend of a man when it came to handling teams of horses. He remembered them all, ... and he described them all to Kate while he passed on to her the lore of generations. That Father might have passed it on to her only because Carl was off rodeoing was a suspicion Kate had refused to let surface. ("Runaway" pp.194-195)

"One thing about Johnnie, she's in no killin' hurry. Don't know what her Dad would do without her. She's always been his girl. Or boy. They just keep me around the place to cook." ("The Reining Pattern" p.25)

The family had run so to girls that Lou had become my father's boy. ... In her battle against femininity, she had followed a pattern; I knew a dozen ranch women who lived in boots and blue jeans and spent their days in field and corral. ("Granddaughters" p.63)

To say his anger was incomprehensible to me was to say the least. He had always been proud of me, called me his boy--what had I done to deserve this? ("Kissing My Elbow" p.138)

In Mary Blew's short story "Runaway," a woman returns to her family ranch and seeks to make peace with her estranged brother by rekindling her relationship with the land and the animals raised on it:

Plenty of women drove horses. Cowgirls, hands, daughters of men like Father, women like the one Kate might have become, women who did all the work on ranches and broke horses and wore their blue jeans faded and low. It was worth a try. Let Carl see for himself what a hand she could make. ("Runaway" p.195)

Historically farm women have been involved in on-farm enterprises that provided them with income from off-farm sources. (Jenson) In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women frequently earned "butter and egg money" or obtained needed supplies from selling milk products and eggs. Lydia Sanderson uses the surplus milk from her goats to augment her supplies and income:

"I have brought a little milk with me," she said. "I am trying to find a few people to trade for it, if I can, as I often have more then I need."

"I'm cooking for a crew over behind Meacham," he said, ... "I've got a cash allowance for groceries and I would like to buy milk ... cheese ... butter ... off you ..." (The Jump-Off Creek pp.76,135-136)

By the 1950s fruit, vegetable, and flower stands replaced the butter and eggs that farmwomen sold to neighbors, or small stores in their community. Farm women also established cottage industries that relied on sewing, cooking, and other traditional

4-H Club skills. It has been estimated that 45% of farm women currently work in family or in-home businesses other than farming. (Rosenfeld)

Farm and ranch women have also been involved in off-farm volunteer work. Examples of this type of labor include committee work, participation in community organizations (civic and religious), and membership in farm organizations.

Living in an environment defined by nature and controlled by men, farm women, in the performance of their multiple work roles, have demonstrated the ability to survive and the strength to endure. Blew's female characters comment on this strength and ability in several of her stories:

... my mother, my second cousin, how many other women in the bitter cycle of planting and harvesting, complaining and compromising, resolving to make do. What can't be cured must be endured. ("Granddaughters" p.69)

"How did she stand it? " she cried. "She had eight children and lost five. Two of diphtheria, two of influenza, one drowned. Living out there on the homestead for days and days without seeing anybody, and there isn't even a tree in sight. Carrying all her water a quarter of a mile, and Grandfather never ever talked, to her or anybody else--"

The old ladies looked at each other again, and Emily knitted carefully to the end of her row. "Things come to us, and we meet

them. Your grandmother did her duty, same as we all did." ("Paths Unto the Dead" p.66)

And Lydia Sanderson, a woman homesteader sitting in her dark, small one-room cabin reflecting on a life of hard work that only recently was not done out of obligation as another man's daughter or another man's wife.

"I did all the farm work there for more than fourteen years. I am not afraid of work and I'm used to getting by on little. I believe I can make a living up here all right." She said it in a dry way, plainspoken, so that he believed her, and didn't feel a need to say that he did. (The Jump-Off Creek, p.107)

CONCLUSION

Though the diversity of farm women's contributions was recognized by novelists such as Cather, Aldrich, and Sandoz in the 1800s, it would be many decades later before the work efforts of farm women would be formally recognized by the government and agricultural researchers. (e.g., Haney and Knowles, Rosenfeld, Sachs) Modern fiction writers such as Gloss and Blew vividly portray the historical and contemporary dimensions of the interdependence of women and agriculture by blending the facts, with fiction.

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